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ABSTRACT

This is a report about a program at the University of Massachusetts which allows undergraduate students to devise and teach one-credit courses with appropriate faculty supervision. Students without prior teaching experience must first take two credit hour workshops which train them in teaching skills. The program is coordinated by student affairs staff in the different residential areas of the campus. Though many experimental programs tend to be eliminated when finances are cut for education, this particular program has been popular, and therefore not eliminated, because it seems to exploit resources within the university and because peer teaching appears to be good for both the teacher and the participants. Evaluation is carefully arranged to insure the quality of the courses that are offered. (CD)

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Can Students Be Teachers Too?

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Prepared for

Improving College and University Teaching

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Can Students Be Teachers Too?

One of the most unique academic programs at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, allows students to teach each other--for credit. Through the Colloquium Program the ideal learning community nears reality. The role of the undergraduate as teacher (as well as learner) is legitimized by the laying on of academic credit.

The literature on programs using students as teachers indicates that the student's role is usually supplemental to faculty in courses designed primarily by faculty (Pascal, 1974) or that students serve as tutors (Cash, Mirabel, and Sevilla, 1975). The UMass Colloquium Program is unique in that students offer courses of their own choosing and design and for academic credit.

The University of Massachusetts has a number of alternative learning experiences available to students, most of which involve academic credit. The Colloquium Program is based in the three residential areas and is coordinated through the office of the Associate Provost for Special Programs. As did many of the other nontraditional academic programs at UMass, the Colloquium Program initially grew from the desire of students for options to traditional departmental courses. It is now an innovative program boasting of academic quality and support from all segments of the university community, including faculty. Annually,

over four hundred one credit hour courses are offered through the Colloquium Program, all designed to improve the students' academic experience, the number of options available, and his/her knowledge and/or skill development.

There are two basic objectives of the Colloquium Program. It is first an opportunity for students to learn to teach. Undergraduates cannot receive credit for the colloquia by teaching, but as an incentive, two credit hour teacher training workshops are offered for undergraduate instructors. Unless the undergraduate instructor can demonstrate adequate teaching competancies and past training, s/he is required to attend the teacher training workshops. The purpose of the workshop is twofold: (1) skill development; and (2) support for improvement. Micro-teaching, role-playing, and model tapes are used to facilitate skill development. Teaching improvement results from new knowledge, practice, and a low risk environment which encourages experimentation. As a supportive venture, part of the teacher training workshop deals with specific problems encountered by the instructor in his/her colloq. The problems are analyzed, improvement strategies are developed, and change is encouraged. The teacher training workshop is a clear expression of the value placed upon learning to teach in the Colloquium Program.

The second major objective of the Colloquium Program involves the knowledge and/or skill each colloq participant acquires. The Colloquium Program was envisioned by the faculty senate as a unique opportunity to combine the intellectual process with experiential learning through courses that supplement the university curriculum. Each residential area has defined procedures for communication and opening relationships with university departments to prevent duplication of university course offerings and to encourage continued faculty support of the Colloquium Program.

Quality control is addressed in a number of ways. Teacher training workshops are one way to improve the quality of the Colloquium Program. Faculty sponsorship of each colloq, clearly delineated, yet flexible, approval procedures for colloq proposals, and evluation are more specific attempts to control quality.

All colloq instructors must acquire sponsorship from a faculty member with the necessary expertise in the subject area of the colloq. Faculty members can be quite helpful to undergraduate instructors by facilitating improved teaching skills, course planning, offering valuable expertise and other support.

The faculty senate has designated a Curriculum Committee be established in each residential area to monitor the colloq approval process and to develop policy. The committee consists of at least fifty percent faculty, the rest of the membership being students and student affairs staff.

Undergraduates wishing to offer a one credit hour colloq submit a proposal to the Curriculum Committee. Such a process requires established criteria for judging a valid learning experience. As a general policy colloq proposals are evaluated on the proposed process of learning rather than focusing only on content. The Curriculum Committee seeks an assessment via course syllabi of how the instructor expects the learners to change or develop. Distinctions are drawn between courses proposing cognitive development (i.e., art history) and courses focusing mainly on development of motor skills (i.e., dancing). Specific criteria are than established by the Curriculum Committee for each learning experience. For example, courses proposing cognitive development may be required sixteen class hours for one credit hour. Courses focusing mainly on motor skills usually require twenty four hours of class time for the awarding of one credit hour.

An extensive evaluation process enhances the quality of the Colloquium Program and facilitates needs assessment and program planning. Each residential area conducts an

evaluation of colloquia at the end of each semester by requiring participants, instructors, and faculty sponsors to submit written evaluations. The evaluation process focuses on the value of each colloq as a learning experience, the value of the teaching experience for the instructor, and suggested changes in the Colloquium Program.

In this time of retrenchment, resources of time and money are short at the University of Massachusetts. The call for increased accountability in resources and academic quality often strike nontraditional programs the hardest. The UMass Colloquium Program, though, is a model of increased collaboration, minimum drain and efficient use of university resources, and quality control in an alternative academic experience.

In summary, the UMass Colloquium Program offers undergraduate students an opportunity to teach, to expand the university academic offerings, and to participate in an alternative learning experience. The unfinished agenda for educational planners is to determine the specific learning outcomes of participants in the Colloquium Program--and then compare the data to other, more traditional learning experiences. To this point, the Colloquium Program has proven the value of students as teachers, and the legitimacy of teaching as a learning experience.

REFERENCES

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